

Little Imperfections by enbyinthesun

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Summary:

The love between Billy and Steve isn't superficial. In fact, it's anything but. These two have a bond that not even the most intrusive thoughts or the rudest party guests can break, and they put their consoling skills to the test when shit gets tough in the hopes that they'll pull through. Because they're stronger now than they were in high school.

1. Brush Strokes

Author's Note:

In case it wasn't clear, Steve has (undiagnosed) autism in this fic, and I will eventually be including more intense stimming and sensory issues later on. So if that is something that is a potential trigger for you, please be aware!

In addition to that, Billy is no longer thin and will be dealing with body dysphoria/body image issues. There's also hinting at him potentially developing an eating disorder.

I wanted this to be a self-love fic, mostly because I never see anything like this. That being said, it's mostly fluff and the boys giving each other the encouragement that they need to get back on their feet. Please let me know if I did a shitty job on the warnings so I can fix them. I rated it as explicit just in case.

Summary for the Chapter:

Billy's having some issues feeling comfortable in his own skin, but it's no issue that King Steve can't fix.

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter is pretty dialogue-heavy and I wrote it fairly quickly, so if I spelled everything wrong, keep it to yourself <3

Caramelizing onions isn't as difficult of a task as Billy originally thought it would be. He kept from burning the house down in the process and the smoke alarm didn't go off for once when he stepped in front of the stove. In short, this was a successful endeavor.

Normally when he gets cooking advice from Karen he winds up

tuning it out halfway through her explanation, having decided that the steps are too complicated and instead settles on letting Steve do the cooking. Or simply ordering out. That's how it always goes. Defeats the purpose of even taking the trip to the Wheeler house because if he's not there to cook, he's getting bedroom eyes from Karen and, without fail, Ted always asks him to help with something out in the garage.

This recipe, however, sounded too good to pass up.

"Hey dummy, come get food," Billy calls.

He plates a patty melt and adds a heap of fries, catching a glimpse of Steve bouncing excitedly on the balls of his feet out of the corner of his eye. The brunet accepts it gratefully when Billy hands it to him and doesn't waste time taking a bite.

"I didn't know you were actually learning how to cook, I just assumed you were going over there to cheat," Steve says through a full mouth.

Billy turns and looks at him in disbelief as he shoves a couple of fries into his mouth.

"If you thought I was cheating on you, why were you letting me go?"

"I'm not your supervisor." He sucks a bit of onion off of his thumb and his eyebrows shoot skyward. "Holy shit, I can't believe you really cooked. This is, like, groundbreaking, right?"

That makes Billy snicker as he watches Steve take another bite of his sandwich.

"Guess so. Is it good?"

"Fuck yes it's good, I'm never cooking again."

"Mm. You know I wasn't actually doing anything shady with Karen, right? It's important to me that you know that."

"What I'm hearing right now is that you may or may *not* have slept with her husband."

Billy snorts and then they're both grinning at each other.

"Now *that* hurts my feelings. Why would I sleep with a guy who can't even replace the belt on his lawnmower?"

"You're right, my bad."

The food smells amazing. *Looks* amazing. The elated look on Steve's face says it all as he wanders over to the table and sits down to dig in. Despite all of that, and despite the sense of accomplishment uplifting his insides, Billy looks at the other sandwich he prepared and sighs.

Some nagging part of his brain, deep deep down, is telling him that he'll be better off if he doesn't eat dinner tonight. He knows that it's a silly thought; eating is essential. But as he grimaces and plops the sandwich on his plate along with some fries, the voice gets meaner and the warm feelings of accomplishment flush out of his system.

Still, he goes and sits down across from Steve, who is already halfway done with his food.

Their legs bump together underneath the table and Billy can't help but smile. Practically everything they own is shabby junk from second hand stores, but it's theirs nonetheless, so Billy is content with it.

Steve apparently doesn't share his feelings because when the table wobbles, he groans and wiggles it some more to determine which leg is the culprit, and gets up out of his seat.

"What did I tell you about throwing away the paper I stuffed under there?" he huffs.

"Hey, don't blame me, it moves and I think it's regular trash." Billy watches him tear a page off of today's newspaper and saunter back to the table. "Maybe we should save up and go to the furniture store. The actual one downtown, not the crappy one."

"We have other shit we gotta fix first, like that hole you punched in the wall. Besides, now it's as good as new, see?"

Steve sits back down and pats the surface of the table to ensure that it doesn't wobble. He flashes a victorious smile when it doesn't, but it's short-lived because his gaze fixes on Billy's plate that's relatively untouched.

"Who says we have to have nice walls first? Table shopping would be cool, we'd actually get to pick something out together," Billy says.

"Are you not hungry?"

He follows the line of Steve's eyes and shrugs nonchalantly.

"It was a good first attempt at making it, I guess, but..."

"But?" Steve prompts. When Billy doesn't continue, he gestures to the food. "Did you eat *anything* today?"

"Yeah. I had a breakfast burrito with Max when I dropped her off at the arcade this morning."

"Bill, that was like seven hours ago, you should eat something."

A hard feeling settles in the pit of Billy's stomach. Something close to guilt, mostly because he knows that Steve is right. He sighs and leans back in his seat.

"Like *you're* one to talk, you forget to eat all the time."

Steve quirks an eyebrow and gets up from his seat, retrieving Billy's plate and taking it over to the counter. He begins to put the food into a plastic container and Billy doesn't bother looking at him.

"That's different, okay? I literally forget to feed myself and if it weren't for my lunch breaks at work, I would probably be even worse about it."

"Your point being?"

"I reminded *you* to eat lunch today and you didn't. That's not forgetting, that's skipping a meal."

This is one of those times that Billy feels like a child being nagged at by a parent even though there are none in sight. It solidifies when

Steve puts his hands on his hips and Billy fights the urge to roll his eyes dramatically like he really wants to. There's no lame excuse to serve up, no little white lie to tell, because Steve caught him. *Caught him*, like a kid who broke a vase and thought their mother wouldn't notice.

That being said, Billy decides to sit there and pout with his arms crossed rather than say anything at all, and Steve grumbles something under his breath as he snaps the lid onto the container.

"When you're hungry, you should heat this up. It was really good," Steve says.

He returns to the table and scoops up his own empty plate, proceeding to wash and rinse the dishes off in the sink before he sets them aside on the drying rack. Their rack that's basically falling apart because it's one of the shitty plastic ones, given to them as a gift from someone who really just wanted to throw the thing out.

Then he disappears into the bedroom.

As annoying as it is, Steve often looks straight through to the back of Billy's skull, it seems like. He's always far more observant than Billy anticipates, and he somehow isn't getting more used to it as time passes.

Kinda makes him wonder how Steve is such a klutz the rest of the time. With emotions, everything.

Billy simply shakes his head and stands up, stretches, and meanders toward the bedroom. Steve happens to be leaving in the same instance, and they get caught in the doorway together.

The brunet's eyes fix anywhere but at Billy and he rubs the back of his neck before he opens his arms.

"Hug?" Steve coos.

It takes less than a second for Billy to step into his space and shut his eyes when Steve's arms wrap around him. He's gentle, holds Billy snug against him and smooths his hands over his back. Nothing but warmth.

“Going shopping for a new table is a good idea,” Steve says. “The people at the store will probably think that we’re fags, though.”

“Aren’t we?”

“Yes.”

They both chuckle at that and Billy buries his face into the crook of Steve’s neck.

“I promise I’m not, like, trying not to eat, I just...”

“It’s okay, baby. I just want you to be happy and healthy, y’know?”

“Mm.”

“*Are* you happy?”

Billy smiles against Steve’s skin. He leans back enough to look at his partner’s face before he reaches up and tucks a strand of Steve’s hair behind his ear.

“Only when I’m with you,” Billy coos.

“I’m honored.”

“Sound like it, then.”

They share a quiet giggle before their lips are sealing together. Steve toys with the chain of Billy’s necklace, twirling his finger around it while the blond’s hands interlock over the small of Steve’s back. Pulls him closer until they’re flush against one another.

It’s soft. Vulnerable in a way that Billy didn’t think he would ever let himself be around another person. He doesn’t miss the way that Steve hums against him right before they part.

“I like that I’m able to make you happy,” Steve lilts. He bites his lip, letting his arms dangle around Billy’s neck. “Do you wanna go with me to have dinner with my parents tomorrow?”

Billy smirks and clicks his tongue.

“Why am I only just now hearing about this? You weren’t going to invite me before?”

“They’re super stressful people to be around, I just didn’t wanna force you into an uncomfortable situation. But, now that I think about it, I probably need you there so I don’t spontaneously combust.”

“Oh? So I’m only invited on the account that I’ll be performing a service for you?”

“Mhm, you’re my emotional support asshole.”

“Can’t say that I’m not flattered. Sure, I’ll go eat rich people’s food with you. Will it be business casual?”

“Ugh, my dad wears three-piece suits like everywhere he goes, so we’d probably be safer dressing up a little bit.”

Billy nods. Just studying Steve’s features and smiling because he can’t help himself.

“Okay,” he says softly.

They stay linked together, gently rocking from side to side on their feet when Steve begins to sway them. And Billy just goes with the flow. Lets his partner continue to toy with his necklace and gently press their foreheads together. It reminds him of how elderly couples dance in their living rooms with no one around to witness or rebuke the action.

Because it’s just them.

“Y’know what we haven’t done in a while?” Steve asks.

“What?”

“Park out at the quarry. We used to all the time, remember?”

“Oh yeah. I thought that was because you didn’t like being in the woods after dark anymore.”

“Psh, I can take the nail bat with me. Besides, I’m getting tired of

staring at that hole in the wall. You know the one. It's about the same size as your fist, needs to be spackled?"

"Alright, I get it, I get it. Let's go, then."

Steve nods and he eagerly pulls away, turning back towards the bedroom and fishing around under the bed for his weapon stash. He pulls the bat out, wood darkened from monster blood and chunks of old flesh clinging to the base of some of the nails, and he gives it a soft test swing. Billy shakes his head and puts his shoes on.

"Don't forget a jacket, it's probably gonna be cold and I'm not gonna give you mine once we're out there."

"Okay," Steve mocks. "I'm not *that* forgetful."

"Whatever."

By the time Billy is standing by the front door, having slipped his favorite hoodie on, he can still hear Steve clambering around in the bedroom. When he finally emerges, his socks are mismatched. Billy looks him up and down and scoffs playfully before snatching his keys off the hook and opening the door.

"What? It's not like anyone's gonna see me. Plus, if they do, I can always just murder them," Steve says.

He swings the bat around as he steps out onto the porch.

"Yeah?"

"Uh-huh."

As soon as Billy's done locking the door behind them, he breaks into a dead sprint to the car. Steve is faster, makes it to his door first, but when he tugs on the handle, it doesn't budge.

"Dude, you cheater!" he groans.

Billy snickers and unlocks the driver's door, slipping in and taking his time leisurely reaching over to let Steve in.

“There’s always next time, slowpoke.”

“You’re so not as funny as you think you are.”

Having Steve in the passenger seat has always felt right. Like everything is where it’s supposed to be; their fingers interlocked over the center console, Steve constantly reaching out to change the radio or the air conditioner or something minute just to keep his unoccupied hand busy. It’s something that Billy would smack anyone else for doing.

Several country stations get skipped before Steve settles on R&B, refocussing his attention on the gleam of the streetlights that they pass and finally growing still in his seat. Until he begins to tap his foot restlessly.

“You’re sure you’re okay with coming out here?” Billy asks.

“I think so.”

“Okay. Let me know if you change your mind.”

The car slows and Billy turns off of the road, parking parallel to the cliff that overlooks the quarry. Not too close.

He squeezes Steve’s hand before he lets go and steps out, taking in a breath of cool night air and looking out into the vast sea of trees. Steve does the same and leans his bat against the side of the car. Climbs onto the hood and lays back against the windshield. Billy notices him shiver and huffs a sigh.

“Did you seriously forget your jacket? After I reminded you?”

“I grabbed it, I just... left it on the bed.”

Billy climbs up and settles next to Steve, tugging his hoodie over his head and tossing it into the brunet’s lap.

“You’re unbelievable.”

“Oh, you don’t have to—”

“Shut up and put it on, pretty boy.”

Steve does as he’s told and slips into it. He hums contentedly once it’s on, and Billy has to admit that it looks cute on him, even though it’s a little baggy. They both lean back and Steve tucks himself under Billy’s arm.

“Thought you said you *wouldn’t* give me your jacket,” Steve chuckles.

“I lied, obviously. Are you comfy?”

He pulls Steve closer into his side and rubs his arm as if trying to warm him up.

“Mhmm.”

Billy smiles. He stretches his free arm up, setting it underneath his head in a makeshift pillow. Just admiring the sound of soft wind blowing through the trees and whistling through the canyon, able to see the moon and the constellations with no city lights to obstruct them.

It’s nice.

His shirt lifts up ever so slightly and allows his tummy to peak out, just enough to show his happy trail to the open air. Steve is quick to settle his hand there. Thumbs over the soft little hairs and smooths his hand around to Billy’s side.

One of his fingers finds a stretch mark and traces it with a feather-like touch. Delicate in a way that surprises Billy. Steve’s voice is hushed when he speaks next.

“You’re not cold?”

“Nah, it’s kinda nice out here.”

Steve nods. Nuzzles his face into Billy’s chest and begins to softly rub up and down at his side.

It wasn’t that long ago that Billy would wince and flinch away from such touches. His face would heat up and he would reflexively suck

his stomach in, until one day Steve apparently had enough and barked *let me love on you* at him.

That was probably the first time he saw the brunet get mad enough to raise his voice. And it worked, for some reason. Billy hasn't shied away from any of Steve's touches since then.

Sure, he was pushy and a bit rude about it, but it was coming from a good place. As is evident by the way he hums quietly and follows the curve of Billy's waist with his hand. Like he's not even really thinking about what he's doing as he does it.

"Can I ask you something?" Steve whispers.

"Always."

"I promise I'm not saying this to be mean, but do you still... feel like you have to lose weight? You mentioned something about it a couple of months ago."

"I dunno," Billy admits. "Why do you ask?"

Steve sits up. His hand remains where it's at on Billy's hip and his thumb swipes back and forth softly over the gentle swell of his stomach. The expression on his face is a fond one, from what Billy can make out through the darkness.

"Guess I just want to reassure you that you don't have to."

"Yeah, I know."

"Okay. Because... if you *want* to, I can be there with you, y'know? I can go to the gym with you and eat healthier food with you, but..."

Billy waits patiently when Steve trails off. Settles his hand on the brunet's lower back and listens to crickets chirping in the distance while Steve collects his thoughts. It isn't an awkward silence by any means. It's calm.

"I don't want you to not take care of yourself for the sake of dropping a couple of pounds, because it isn't fucking worth it, not even short-term," Steve continues. He looks out over the cliff, avoiding Billy's

gaze while the blond watches him with intent eyes. "It's bogus to think that only skinny people are pretty and, like, worthy of love and stuff."

Billy is quiet for a beat. Steve's finger finds the line of another stretch mark at Billy's side, following the little divot in his flesh as though being able to touch it gives him some form of little pleasure.

"Thanks," Billy whispers.

"Mhm."

"I had no idea you felt that way. This whole time, I just thought you were a chubby chaser or something."

Steve laughs at that but cuts himself off by clearing his throat.

"No. Well, not that I'm *not* attracted to you, because I *am* , obviously—"

"It's okay, Stevie, I was joking."

"Oh," Steve sighs. He turns his head to look down at Billy again. "You still aren't funny."

"That's fine, I'll be here all night. Plenty of time to make up for it."

A gust of wind rolls by, picking Billy's shirt up and making Steve shiver as a chill soaks through to his skin. Once it's calm again, he adjusts Billy's shirt back down where it was before and bites his lip.

"Hope I phrased most of that correctly. It'd be easier for me to smack our heads together and transfer my thoughts over instantly."

"Yeah? What would they be if you could?"

"Something like *Billy hot Billy hot Billy hot holy shit I don't wanna have dinner with my parents tomorrow Billy hot .*"

"You think I'm hot?" Billy chuckles. "What are you, gay? That's embarrassing."

“Shut up. It would be great if you would accept my compliments, I’m getting sick of your shit.”

“Okay, I’m *honored* that you think I’m *fuckable* .”

Steve scoffs and looks away. Billy just grins up at him.

“That’s not what I meant.”

Another silence ensues, the sounds of the wilderness filling the void.

It gives them a moment to think, a moment for Billy to realize that he feels a little dumb right now. Dumb because he didn’t sit down with his partner and eat dinner with him earlier like he should have. For letting a mean whisper fight its way out of the deep darkness of his mind, and allowing it to get its claws around him.

“I know,” he says.

He rolls onto his side, facing Steve and humming in approval when the brunet lays down with him.

“Good.”

They lay there for a moment, completely still, until Billy moves closer and Steve instinctively braces his arms around him.

“Sometimes I just don’t feel... the best,” Billy confesses. “I get pissed because I don’t look like I did in high school, and it sucks.”

“And that’s okay. No one said you have to feel like you’re at the top of your game all the time.”

“I guess.”

Steve rests his chin atop Billy’s head.

“If there was anything you could change about yourself, what would it be?”

The smile is evident in his voice, and rather than teasing him like usual, Billy sighs.

"I'd make it so I could eat whatever I want and stay skinny, like that Wheeler girl."

"You'd want to be Nancy?"

"Not *be* her, just like... steal her metabolism."

"Well, you wanna know what *I'd* change about you?"

Despite the twinge of fear beginning to coil in the pit of Billy's stomach, he mutters, "Sure."

"I wouldn't change anything. I'd keep you exactly as you are right now, even if you're a brat and you break stuff when you get mad."

That catches Billy off-guard. He always assumed that there had to be *something* that Steve wished he had. A six pack. A bigger dick. Anything, really. But hearing his words makes Billy's insides grow warm.

"Really?"

"Mhmm," Steve coos. He gives Billy a squeeze and the blond huffs a comfortable sigh. "Don't be so hard on yourself, okay? You deserve to eat good food and enjoy it without anything holding you back." Billy can't help but smile at that, and then Steve continues, "Besides, your tummy is cute anyway."

"Now you're just fucking with me."

"I'm dead serious."

"What's cute about it, then?"

Steve scoffs.

"I don't know, it just is, okay?"

"Hmm, I smell bullshit."

Billy snickers when he hears Steve grumble something, and then one of his hands is moving down to the small of Billy's back. His palm

comes to rest against Billy's side again, carefully this time, and gently sneaks under his shirt.

"I like your little lightning bolts," Steve says.

He thumbs over the blond's skin and squeezes after a moment.

"My stretch marks?"

"Yeah."

"Why would you like *those* ? They're ugly."

Steve doesn't remove his hand, instead finding another one of the little divots that feathers along Billy's skin and brushes his fingers over it.

"No they aren't," he croons. "You're just mean."

"They're a fuckin' eyesore, and I literally never stop getting them. Bane of my existence."

It's hard to ignore the touch that sweeps partially onto Billy's stomach. Delicate and adoring because it's Steve who's doing the touching. Still, Billy shifts slightly and suppresses the feeling of embarrassment creeping up his neck.

Because it's just Steve.

"First of all, they're natural. I don't know anybody who doesn't have them *somewhere* ."

"Still."

"Wanna know what I think? I think you're just looking at them from the wrong perspective."

"Enlighten me, I'm waiting with baited breath," Billy sneers.

"Stretch marks are..." Steve trails off. He sighs and settles his palm flat against Billy's hip. "They're like the final brush strokes on the canvas that is your body. Put there with intention and purpose by the

artist to be seen and appreciated, just like any other piece of artwork. I hope you know that I don't think they're eyesores or things to be ignored, because they really aren't, when you think about it."

For a moment, Billy is speechless. He listens to the rhythm of Steve's breathing and feels the rise of goosebumps when he moves his hand, leaving a chill in its wake. Then he's being squeezed by two strong arms again.

"That's actually... nice," Billy whispers.

"So when you're feeling bad about yourself, why don't you try thinking like that instead of putting yourself down?"

"Is that what you do?"

"Sometimes. It helps me refocus."

Billy huffs a laugh and snuggles further into Steve's chest.

"I don't care what they say about you, Harrington, you're a pretty smart guy."

"That's a little bit backhanded, but thanks."

They both chuckle and Billy tenses up when his stomach growls, piercing through the quiet. Steve hums victoriously and the blond finally gives in and rolls his eyes.

"Think it's too late to reheat my sandwich?" Billy asks.

"No. Are you ready to go home, then?"

"Uh-huh."

Steve loosens his hold so Billy can move away, but before they're too far apart, Steve snags him in a sweet kiss. Then he's grinning and sliding off of the hood of the car and grabbing his bat. Lucky that he didn't have to use it.

"Y'know what I just thought of?" Steve chuckles as he climbs into the passenger seat.

“What?”

The engine is roaring to life, and Billy can't help but look at Steve in the dim light shining from the stereo. He looks absolutely elated, bundled up in Billy's jacket, and the memory of his affectionate touches overtakes Billy's mind in a moment.

Makes him wonder what other beautiful things his partner is capable of making him feel.

“I didn't even know that lawnmowers *had* belts.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I hope this was relatable. No one knows the magic words to solve someone else's body image issues, but I think it's still good to give encouragement where there's some needed.

Comments and kudos are always appreciated! I hope this fic reaches the right audience lmao

2. Safe Space

Summary for the Chapter:

Billy accompanies Steve to his parent's house for dinner, but things don't exactly go as planned.

Notes for the Chapter:

Steve deals with being overstimulated and suffers from a meltdown in this chapter, so be aware of that before going in just in case that's a potential trigger for you <3

It's still pretty fluffy though

Hope you enjoy reading!

Billy didn't spend too much time digging through his closet this morning upon waking up. He pushed himself out of bed, showered, and had coffee. Checked the answering machine. Watered the succulents that Max gifted him for his birthday a few months back. The usual stuff he does to keep himself on track.

The rest of the day passed by feverish and slow. He wandered around in his boxers and a robe for most of it, finally deciding that it was time to get dressed when he would usually be getting home for the day and slipping into pj's.

His outfit isn't exactly formal, per se, but he's always been decent at spicing up his presentation so that it doesn't seem as cheap as it actually is; it's all in the accessories. Besides, it's not like he's never met Steve's parents before, and his desire to impress them has long since been extinguished.

Billy does, however, still have to psych himself up to give the whole *we're long-term roommates and just really really really good friends* talk to whoever may inquire. People eat that shit right out of his hand every single time without much convincing.

'Cause Billy's got a girl back in Cali yadda yadda. Or something to that

effect. A girl that no one from Hawkins will ever meet.

Because she doesn't exist.

Still, it's always a treat to get to mingle with rich idiots and pretend that he's cut from the same cloth as them, even though his skinny jeans and shabby old boots say otherwise. As he looks himself over in the full-body mirror that's propped up in the bedroom, he smirks at his reflection.

“*Oof*, lookin' good, Hargrove,” he flirts.

A light, airy feeling blossoms in his chest because he really *believes* the words as they come out of his mouth, and only god knows when that happened last. Probably months before he first discovered that the cut of his jawline had begun to soften.

But that mean whisper he's so used to hearing doesn't make an appearance where it would usually rear its ugly head. Make him ignore the hunger pains and push through the day like molasses. Instead, he looks at himself and feels... okay. Like maybe he'll be fine wearing his flashy attire, sipping sparkling water, and eating hors d'oeuvres all while brandishing his most expensive laugh to charm anyone he might cross paths with at dinner.

Like maybe he'll feel fine just going out and being himself again.

He's the only one who's excited for what lies ahead, apparently, because Steve hasn't uttered a word since he awoke earlier this afternoon. Billy struts into the living room, feeling a twinkle of glee in the pit of his stomach at the heavy sound of his boots hitting the wood.

“Is this okay?” he asks, gesturing to himself. “Turns out I don't even really own anything business casual, let alone formal.”

Steve remains silent in his spot on the edge of the couch, just staring straight ahead as he twiddles his thumbs in his lap and gently rocks back and forth. When he doesn't offer any acknowledgment, Billy snaps his fingers a couple of times and earns his attention.

“Hmm?”

“Hey, bud, it’s almost five. Don’t you think you need to get ready soon?”

“Yeah,” Steve says softly. He pauses his movements, sucking in a breath before he looks up at Billy. “Do you think it would be that serious if we didn’t go?”

“I mean, they invited you, right? Must mean they want you there.”

Steve shrugs. Like it’s up for debate. Billy steps over to the couch and begins to sit, noticing the subtle way that Steve shrinks in on himself, and decides to sit a few inches farther away than he usually does to give the brunet more room to breathe.

“Sometimes I’m not sure if they... *want* me around or not. It’s like I’m a prop in their movie, y’know? Completely replaceable and exchangeable.”

Briefly, Billy stares and thinks about what to say. How to respond in a way that won’t make him seem insensitive. He doesn’t arrive at any plausible avenues other than uttering an apology that would inevitably be useless, because *he* has nothing to apologize for, and Steve begins rocking again. Slowly at first. Then he gains a little momentum.

“Is there a reason you feel like you *have* to go?” Billy asks.

He leans back, spreads his legs, and drapes his arm over the back of the couch. Just watching Steve like he doesn’t get a front-row seat to this kind of thing all the time.

“They’re hoofing me some money. Well, my *dad* is, anyway. I’d feel bad if I just, like, took it and didn’t have the courtesy to at least show up to claim it.”

“Then let’s just do the bare minimum, alright? Show up, satisfy the qualifications of the visit, and leave as soon as it feels like too much.” Billy smiles when Steve slows down and seems to think on the suggestion. “Plus, I’m gonna be there with you the whole time.”

“It sounds good when you *say* it, but... Actually *doing* it? I dunno.”

"We could come up with some stupid excuse in case we need to bail. If worse comes to worst, I can just break your arm, and then we'd have a definite way out."

Steve goes still and glances at Billy over his shoulder. The look he wears is a mixture between exhausted and unamused, but the blond chuckles anyway.

"I think I would prefer to spend my evening *outside* of the emergency room, thank you."

"Well, what's the verdict?"

"Ugh," Steve sighs. "I need money and you already have your stupid, cute outfit on, so we basically don't have a choice."

"Mm, go get ready then. Gotta at least be fashionable if we're showing up late."

It takes Steve a moment to push himself up off of the couch and trudge miserably to the bedroom. The sounds of him shuffling around are audible and rather than bickering about their time constraint, Billy sits quietly. Patiently. Like he's supposed to.

He rolls his head back against the top of the couch cushion and stares up at the ceiling. Thinks about last night, about how it seemed like Steve reached into his brain and grabbed the exact right words to say. Because Steve somehow *always* knows what to say.

Which words will console and which words will instigate.

Billy tilts his head when footsteps pad down the hall, glancing up at the brunet as he comes to a stop near the front door. His hair is combed. Shirt tucked into his slacks and blazer looking positively perfect on his shoulders. All Billy can manage to think at this moment is how Steve looks absolutely stunning.

"That was fast," Billy muses.

"Can we just go and get this over with?"

"Touchy."

Then Billy is getting up and snatching his keys off the hook, following Steve out onto the porch. He has half a mind to race him to the car like he always does. To let Steve win like he does *most* of the time, watch him scramble into his seat and buckle in as fast as he can with a giddy smile on his face.

But he sees the way that Steve stands there with his arms crossed. The way he shifts, twists, and rolls his shoulders in clothes that are not in his usual wardrobe, looking like he might be apt to crawl out of his skin. And Billy decides against it.

Instead, he walks with his partner and racks his brain for something, *anything* to say that might cheer him up.

“You clean up nice, Stevie. I think blue’s really your color.”

Steve remains quiet as he slides into his seat. Fastens his seatbelt and stares out the window as though cheesy compliments like that don’t usually make his skin flush. Despite the bitter, unwelcome feeling starting to tighten in Billy’s stomach, he starts the car and does his duty as chauffeur.

It’s really no surprise that the entire five-minute drive to the other side of town is tense. There’s no traffic. Practically every stoplight is green. The radio station that’s still on from last night plays obscure pop music during the day, apparently, and Billy would change it if that didn’t mean that he would have to endure country in its place.

He steals numerous glances at Steve. Keeps his arm resting between their seats in case the brunet decides to hold his hand.

Steve only moves once they turn down the street that his parents live on, and it’s to lean forward to get a better look out the front windshield.

“What the fuck? Why are there so many cars?” Steve asks.

“Your parents are having a dinner party, aren’t they? I thought that’s why we were coming.”

The expression on Steve’s face shifts from confused to horrified in a matter of seconds as Billy parks off the side of the road.

“They didn’t say anything about it being a *party* .”

“It makes sense, though, right? Your dad has money to spare and clients to impress, probably.”

Billy looks up at the huge house. He thinks of all the times that he’d parked out back while they were still in school and snuck in through the patio, always using the spare key that Steve kept hidden out in the bushes for him. Then he smiles to himself.

“If you knew there were going to be people here, why didn’t you tell me?” Steve groans.

“Hey, I didn’t know that you didn’t know, okay?” Billy shuts the car off, leaving the key in the ignition as he turns to face Steve. “Besides, when have they ever invited *just* you over for anything?”

“That’s... Fair. I didn’t mentally prepare to be around a bunch of people, so I guess I’m just freaking out a little.”

“It’s nothin’ you haven’t done before; just mingling with old people and pretending to care about the stock market and lame politics. We’ll be alright.”

The air between them is silent and still for a moment. That sour feeling comes back, licks up Billy’s spine like fire and makes him clench his jaw. Makes him want to grab Steve by the shoulders and push him into the house, insist that this isn’t that big of an ordeal and show him that he has no real reason to be fretting so much.

Then his eyes wander into the back seat and he sighs. His hoodie is bundled up on the seat, discarded from when Steve got too hot on the drive home last night and tossed it back there without a care in the world. Billy thinks of how comfortable and cozy he looked when he first pulled it on. How he had been so gentle and sweet afterwards, even though he obviously had his own frustrations plaguing his mind.

So, rather than manhandling him, Billy leans back in his seat. Toys with his keys still dangling from the ignition and pushes the cruddy feeling away, wills it deep enough down that his jaw relaxes again.

“Do you still wanna go in?” he asks. “We can go home if you don’t.”

Steve drums his fingers against his leg and looks up at the house.

“We’re already here, so we might as well follow through.”

And then Steve is opening his door and stepping out. Billy pulls the key out and follows suit, crossing the street and ascending the porch steps to the intimidating front door.

They stand there, both completely still, and Steve heaves a shaky sigh.

“Can you stay with me when we get in there?”

“Course, pretty boy.”

The tiniest hint of a smile spreads on Steve’s face as he reaches over and rings the doorbell. It’s a grand sound. Makes the house seem much bigger than it really is. More luxurious and expensive.

“I’m really out of practice with, y’know, being social in big groups,” Steve admits.

His voice is hushed, like he’s afraid of someone eavesdropping even though it’s just them outside. Billy hesitantly reaches for his hand, stops before he makes any contact, and chews his lip.

“Let me handle it, alright? Just tolerate your parents for as long as you need to and we’ll go.” Steve nods, just staring at the door as the loud *click clack* of heels can be heard from the other side and Billy continues, “Can I hold your hand?”

“Mhm.”

Steve opens his fist and Billy’s fingers slide between his. He rubs the back of his hand with his thumb and squeezes, having wanted to do so all day long, and feels accomplished when heat rises to the brunet’s cheeks.

Just like it’s supposed to.

The moment of intimacy is fleeting, though, because as soon as the door begins to creak open, they let go and take a step apart. Steve’s

mother is answering the door within seconds, and she spreads a big smile when she sees them.

“Steven!” she exclaims. “You made it.”

“I made it,” he repeats.

Without asking or giving a proper warning, she steps into his space and pulls him down to her level, which is about a head or so shorter than he is, and his entire body goes rigid. Mrs. Harrington doesn’t let go. Tightens her hold and scowls when he attempts to lean away after a moment.

It’s awkward. Makes it hard for Billy to suppress the urge to grimace.

“Ugh, you’re always so stingy with hugs. That’s not normal, you know,” she informs.

Steve sighs. Allows her to get a few more seconds and another squeeze in before she lets go and he stands up straight again, flattening out his shirt as she turns her sights on Billy.

“Good to see you again, William,” she says.

“Good to see *you* , Vivian,” he replies.

And, wow, if that exchange didn’t strip about ten years off of his life.

He’s really just thankful that she didn’t attempt to rope him into a bony embrace and follows Steve inside while trying not to dwell on it too much.

Every time he’s here, he thinks of all the times he used to come over to goof around. To get out of his house for the night or simply cause mayhem with Steve.

They’d crack open a bottle of wine out of the back of the liquor cabinet and replace what they drank with water afterward, hoping that no one would notice that the burgundy had turned a sort of pinkish hue. It was during one of those instances where they were both a little tipsy, giggling hysterically as they snuck the altered bottle back into the cabinet, that they acknowledged that maybe they

were more than friends.

That maybe all of those times they pushed each other around for just one second too long or allowed their hands to brush at their sides weren't accidents. Maybe there was a reason that they felt the need to sneak around, because they knew all along that what they had was... something else.

In hindsight, Billy thinks he was a little naive for not noticing how badly he caught feelings sooner. The memories are still nice, though; he can look at each room in this house and imagine he and Steve interwoven into each other's spaces. Intimately engaged even though they had no idea at the time.

When he glances over at Steve as they follow Vivian down the hall to the living room, he thinks that maybe Steve doesn't see the happy memories here.

There's a good handful of people in the room when they enter it. All wearing suits or otherwise pricey-looking dresses, as expected. Very upscale for Hawkins in Billy's personal opinion. Then again, the Harrington's are about as wealthy as it gets around here.

Vivian parts ways with them, but not before a man with a graying mustache notices them and wanders over to presumably introduce himself.

And so the game begins.

Billy stays practically linked with Steve at the hip, hijacking every awkward introduction and every conversation that gets directed at Steve. It's all firm handshakes and charming, suave smiles, like he's chatting with a room full of Karen and Ted Wheelers.

It's not too difficult of a venture. Standing between Steve and people who look like touchy types is sort of second nature to Billy at this point, and he counts them in his head as though he's keeping score. Like this really *is* a game. One that he enjoys playing, if only for the purpose of sparing his partner the trouble of having to interact with others against his will.

Steve mostly just stands there. Already a husk of a person even though it seems like they've only been here for a few minutes.

He either keeps his gaze aimed low at his shoes, the wall, or at some part of Billy, but never makes eye contact with anyone who approaches. The blond wishes that he would have done more. Maybe offered to have Steve wait in the car while he ran inside and dealt with his parents for him or something. It would be better than having to watch Steve run on autopilot like this.

And Billy would give *anything* to be able to hold his hand or hug him right now.

Vivian approaches with an older-looking woman in tow, already chatting about something with little smiles on their faces.

"Are you sure he's yours? His hair is altogether too wild, needs to flatten down," the woman says.

There's a tense silence for a split second before she steps closer and reaches out to touch Steve's hair. She combs her fingers through his bangs and cups a hand over his cheek, guiding him down so she can inspect him more closely.

It baffles Billy as to why Steve *allows* it. Why he lets this woman who he apparently doesn't know put her hands on him like they're thick as thieves. But when he looks closer, he sees clear as day that Steve's face is scrunched up and beet red. The kind of red that pushes beyond what could be considered a blush and falls somewhere closer to unbridled rage.

"I've been saying that for *years* . He would never let me give him a trim no matter how many times I asked," Vivian adds.

She just watches as this woman screws up her son's hair.

Billy clears his throat.

"That's funny, 'cause it looks like *your* hair could use some volume," Billy sneers, looking down at the woman.

Whoever she is, or whoever she *thinks* she is, looks confused and

simultaneously repulsed by the comment. She releases Steve and takes a step back while Vivian hardens her eyes at Billy.

“How rude. You invited this boy, Vivian?”

“Yeah, I was invited. I don’t just stroll into parties like I’m sure *some* people do.”

“You’re implying?”

Billy looks her up and down slyly with disinterest, eyes catching on the familiar pearlescent beads wrapping around her wrist.

“Well, correct me if I’m wrong, but your *husband* was invited and you came along because you had nothing better to do. Hoping to steal a few bracelets and eat a hot meal that you didn’t have to make,” Billy says. “How’d I do?”

Rather than spitting something foul back at him like she probably wants to, she hides her wrist behind her back and turns to stalk off. Vivian glares and takes a step to pursue her, but first, she points a finger in Steve’s face and hisses, “I thought you kept better company.”

Then she’s hurrying after the woman who, evidently, may have actually snagged a few souvenirs from her jewelry drawer. Billy can’t help himself. He cackles and turns back to Steve, watching him try to smooth his hair back into position.

“Yeah, Stevie, how *dare* you hang out with someone rude like *me* ?” he teases.

Steve doesn’t laugh. He merely huffs and starts swaying back and forth between his feet, but he holds still as soon as he notices his father approaching.

He’s holding a glass of some, probably expensive, white wine and swirling it around in an amused manner. Steve doesn’t look at him. Hunching his shoulders a little bit like he’s preparing to get scolded.

“Keeping things lively, I see,” Mr. Harrington comments.

Something about the guy has never sat right with Billy. He doesn't even know his first *name* , for starters, and who the hell in their right mind walks around in tailored suits all the time?

To his knowledge, Steve was never the kid who showed up to class with busted lips or black eyes, but the way he inches away from his father makes Billy's blood boil.

Makes him want to grab the guy by the collar and shove him back a few feet as a precaution.

"The only way I know how to, sir. Hope that's okay," Billy says.

"I can always buy Vivian new bracelets." Mr. Harrington looks at Steve. Almost like he's inspecting him, searching for flaws in his demeanor. Steve straightens his posture in response. "This might not be a concern at the forefront of your mind, Billy, but it isn't as easy to replace clients. Hawkins is a small community, can't just throw down some cash and get another one like that."

He snaps his fingers. Steve flinches at the sound.

"It's not a concern of mine, no," Billy says.

"Maybe it should be; you do yard work around town, don't you?"

"I'm actually glad you're bringing this up because there's been something bugging me since we started this conversation."

Mr. Harrington smiles at that and shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

"Let's hear it," he sneers.

"If I'm doing yard work for a *client* of mine, and this person knows that I keep Steve in my company but still chooses to be rude to him, wouldn't it make sense for me to take offense to that?" Billy asks, speaking slowly as though he's talking to a child. "Because in this situation, disrespect towards him translates to disrespect towards me. By that same token, it's also disrespectful towards you."

"That doesn't inherently□"

“This is your house, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

The look of delight dims on Mr. Harrington’s face as Billy clicks his tongue.

“And Steve’s your son?”

“ Yes .”

“So why in the hell are you letting some self-entitled woman come into *your* house, disrespect *your* son, steal *your* wife’s jewelry, and get away with it?”

Billy raises his eyebrows, smirking deviously when Steve’s father glances at the wall and begins to tap his foot. When he has nothing to say for himself, the blond chuckles again, crossing his arms.

“Right. That’s probably not a concern at the forefront of your mind, is it? Maybe it should be.”

Steve shifts and turns to face the doorway they entered through. Head still ducked.

“Bill,” he whispers. “Stop.”

“No, this is unacceptable behavior, and you deserve an apology. Am I *right* , Mr. Harrington?”

Billy keeps his eyes trained on Steve’s father. The guy looks between him and Steve and offers a polite smile. It contrasts the angry shade of red spreading up his neck.

“Have a good day, boys,” he dismisses.

Then he’s turning tail and disappearing back into the mix of suits and gowns. This whole ordeal is making Billy want to pop his top, to go storming after both of Steve’s parents and slap them around a bit until they start using some common sense. Start actually *respecting* their son for once. Billy exhales slowly, attempting to suppress the bitterness he feels claw its way up the back of his throat, and turns to

Steve.

Steve who is no longer standing next to him.

He barely catches sight of his shoes before he's completely ascended the stairs and Billy is quick to follow. Trailing after him through the entryway and up the steps. Some form of apology is already sitting on his tongue, and he opens his mouth to speak as he strides into Steve's old room, snapping it shut once he's inside.

There's no longer a bed, nor a dresser. It hardly looks like a habitable room anymore; boxes are stacked everywhere, full of miscellaneous items like holiday decor and fabrics.

This is a storage closet/sewing room now.

Not a bedroom. Not a safe space.

The time it takes Billy to process this is enough time for Steve to have done the same. He looks around for a moment and starts pacing quickly, huffing breaths that are shallow and quick in succession.

"Hey," Billy starts softly. He extends a hand, but he stops when he sees the expression on Steve's face. "I'm sorry about your parents, Stevie, I"

"You made it *worse*."

"I was just..."

Billy retracts his hand. Watching as his partner begins to shake his head frantically and pinch his eyes shut. He's never seen the brunet quite this overwhelmed before. Barely a moment passes by before Steve stops in his tracks and shifts like there's a bug crawling down his spine, proceeding to rip his blazer off, shuck it to the ground and cup his hands over his ears.

He inhales a few hard breaths. Bottom lip beginning to quiver. Then there are tears trailing down his cheeks.

Every muscle in Billy's body activates all at once. The urge to grab Steve and pull him into a tight hug overtakes him, but he doesn't act

on it. Instead choosing to clutch his fists at his sides.

If Billy could conjure the right words to say, the right actions to take, he would do it in a heartbeat. Reach right into Steve's brain and find the solution.

But he can't.

This problem isn't one that can be fixed with any amount of nails or glue or even his fists. Because nothing is physically broken.

He thinks back to the times he would sneak around with Steve. Back to their first kiss, how Steve asked for permission before he leaned in and caught Billy off-guard before he said yes. How every minute after that hasn't been perfect, but it's the damn nearest thing to bliss that he'll ever get to experience, simply because Steve brings out the best in him.

And he thinks of last night.

It seems like it happened so long ago, even though he can still feel those fingers tracing soft circles at his sides. Hear the warm lilt of that calm voice over the wind whistling in the canyon. See the comfortable silhouette of the dork that wanted to park out in the woods even though he's terrified of what might be lurking beyond the treeline.

His partner that's so forgetful that he left his jacket at the house on a chilly autumn night.

Warm fuzzies suddenly bloom in Billy's chest, and then it clicks.

"Be right back," he blurts.

Then he's rushing out of the room and barrelling down the steps, fishing his keys out of his pocket and throwing the front door open. He cuts across the lawn. Doesn't bother looking before he crosses the street and spam-unlocks his car until he reaches the handle.

When he has what he wants, he barely has time to shut the door before he's racing back towards the house.

In the entryway, Vivian is standing near the base of the stairs, tapping her foot and looking on as Billy hurriedly passes her.

“What are you□”

“Not now,” he interrupts.

He doesn’t bother looking at her. Doesn’t really care if she’s fuming mad at his rude outbursts, because frankly, she has it coming. In his mind, at least.

Once he’s finally back up in Steve’s old room, he’s panting slightly. Stepping into the brunet’s space and very, *very* gently placing a hand on his shoulder. This earns Steve’s attention. Prompts him to open his now-puffy eyes and brandish a mean glare. But the look falls from his face almost instantly.

“Here,” Billy coos. He holds his hoodie out, bunched up in his hand. “I know it’s not exactly cold in here or whatever, but you should put it on anyway.”

Steve takes it and feels over the fabric with his fingers before he pulls it on. For a moment, he just stands there. Teary-eyed. Rubbing his fingers together. After stepping back a couple of feet to give him space, Billy picks the blazer up off the ground and folds it over his arm.

“Sorry for touching you without asking,” he whispers.

“Mm.”

It might not be *words* that fix the problem, but Billy feels accomplished when he sees Steve rock back and forth on his feet and flap his wrists. No longer crying. The redness beginning to fade from his complexion.

Looking like himself again.

They stay like that for a short while. Billy is content with being in his partner’s presence while he releases his pent-up frustration through movements and sounds. Content to not have to say or do anything other than just *be* here. Like he promised he would be before they

came inside.

As Steve finally begins to slow his movements and take longer, more controlled breaths, Billy smiles.

“Better?” he asks.

“Tons,” Steve sighs. “I’m sorry for□”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to apologize. *I* was the asshole.”

“True.”

They share a quiet laugh and Steve pushes both hands through his hair. Billy just admires him from the short distance between them.

“If, y’know, you don’t end up getting your money because of me, I can always find more work around town. I know you’re already working double shifts at the video store, so I don’t mind,” Billy offers.

Truth be told, he really *doesn’t* mind. He’s starting to think that he might do anything for Steve; make dinner, hand over his jacket, and everything else he might ever need. Anything he might ever *want* .

Because he’s the closest thing to family that Billy has ever really known.

“You don’t have to do that,” Steve croons.

He looks at the blond for a moment with tired eyes before he opens his arms. Billy moves into an embrace without a second thought, wrapping his arms around Steve and holding him snug against his chest. It’s soft. Warm. Everything that both of them have needed to feel all day long. Steve especially.

“I’m still really sorry, Stevie. Guess I don’t know when to stop,” Billy chuckles.

Steve tucks his face into the crook of his neck. His entire body relaxes in an instant before he gently starts to sway them both side to side.

“That’s why I brought you, though, right? Emotional support

asshole.”

Billy stares at the ugly plaid wallpaper as he rubs circles against Steve’s back. The stuff is somehow never a mood killer even though it definitely should be.

“Exactly.” He noses a kiss in the brunet’s hair. “Wanna get the hell out of this ugly room?”

As Steve chuckles against his skin and twists his fingers around the chain of his necklace, Billy can’t help but grin. Can’t help but think that maybe they’ll be okay, money or no money. Because everything is *exactly* where it’s supposed to be when he’s with Steve.

“Yeah. Let’s go home.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I guess lmk what you think if you have any thoughts?

Sorry if this chapter felt a little rushed, I really wanted to get it finished.